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REVIEWS

Aboriginal Voices: Amerindian, Inuit, and Sami Theater. Edited by Per Brask & William Morgan. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. 145 pages. Cloth.

Brask & Morgan's excellent book voices many views on the recent dramatic awakening among northern Native people to their remarkable performance heritages. Four writers' essays, three playwrights' scripts, and four interviews with writers or artistic directors track how contemporary circumpolar Native theater has presented Native problems, shaped audience responses, and sought to heal culturally split personalities. Each contributor proposes that theater's unique venue enlarges, for all audiences, the megamessage of valuing each person's reunification with their special cultural ethos.

In his introduction, Morgan touts the effectiveness of theater in portraying cultural messages to diverse audiences. He reasons that audience interpretation of the dramatic performance message does not require initiation into the meaning of specific mimed movements or poetic words (p. xiii). Turner's essay on a revived performance version of the Inupiat Eskimo Messenger Feast in Northern Alaska provides a good example. During a dance, a prognosticator uses an oracle shaped like a child's top to foretell the abundance of the migrating whale "crop" for the year (p. 7). Anglo audiences can easily relate this technique to the "loves-me-loves-me-not" spring daisy ritual of their youth. Audience members look on, innocent of the prognosticator's trick of stuffing the oracle with wet feathers so that they cannot spew

around the floor while the top spins. Lots of feathers scattering about would foretell an excellent whale showing for the coming season.

Filewod's essay broods over how destructive Canada's colonizing period was for the integrity of Native culture. He accuses playwright Tomson Highway of dumbing down his award winning play, "The Rez Sisters," and "Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing" so that Anglo audiences concentrate on their entertainment value, thus missing their compelling cultural messages (p.22). Perhaps Filewod gives audiences too little credit for recognizing deeper meaning when he presumes that they will interpret the Native anger expressed in "Dry Lips" as turning inward and becoming self destructive. Perhaps Filewod superimposes on Canadian Natives Anglo conceptions of retribution for property seizure. The Northwest Coast Peoples, whose theater Filewod considers in the second part of his essay, had a developed concept of property and retribution for things wrongfully taken. In contrast, the Chipewyan Cree, Highway's people, along with most North-central Canadian Amerindians, followed a nomadic hunting subsistence pattern, migrating with their food supply. Like other nomads, the Cree nurtured little concept of land or migrating herd ownership. They traced lineage in the woman's line, and husbands went to live with their wives' families. This traditional pattern in their social structure, rather than lack of restitution, could better inform the contemporary Indian male's anger toward the power of women in Canadian Indian culture that Highway's play expresses.

Thonsgaard's and Weiser's essays fit better with the tenor of the interviews in the book's third section than with the essays. They both describe the purposes prompting the founding of the Greenlandic Tukak Theater and Alaska's Tanqik Theater. Brask's interview with the founders of the Sami theater covers some of the same points about the value of circumpolar Native theater as a vital cultural expression that helps renew Native pride in their culture and bring to "outsiders" the message that these cultural traditions both command and merit respect.

A scan of the script for Tanquik Theater's play, "Homecoming," in *Aboriginal Voices* informs discerning readers how very compelling the message of psychological healing can be. "Homecoming's" straightforward advice "know yourself, be yourself" rests on healthy psychological premises. Victor Turner (*By Means of Performance: Inter-Cultural Studies of Theater and Ritual*,

1980:1) concurs that ritual and theater aid cultures in fully expressing and becoming conscious of themselves. As an audience participant at "Homecoming," I can attest to the effectiveness of the play's message and its artifice. As the play begins, an audience plant derides the performers so loudly and convincingly about how irrelevant Eskimo traditions have become that we believe he should be ousted. Although he resists, the actors finally engage him in a dance. They quickly become what counselors would recognize as his support group against the abuses of his childhood resulting from his parents' alcoholism. The "happily-ever-after" resolution of the play may be over simplistic, but playwrights of all cultures usually "instruct" audiences using theatrical devices such as catharsis, satirizing, exaggeration, stereotyping, attentional focusing, symbolism, and opposition.

The play scripts have two important common threads fusing them and the premise of *Aboriginal Voices* together. Above all, each script clearly portrays the value and impact of being true to individual cultural identity. Each play also becomes uniquely Native through its emphasis on a personal spiritual transformation. Reviewer Jeffrey Huntsman sees the roots of Native American ritual as infusing Native American playwright Hanay Geiogamah's plays of the 1970s with cosmic impact (Hanay Geiogamah, *New Native American Drama: Three Plays*, 1980: ix). In *Voices'* Greenlandic script "Inuit—The People," a bad white spirit overwhelms the people, removes their individuality, subjugates them. A true Inuit helper spirit appeals to the chief Inuit spirit to intercede with the sea mother for the revival of the people's human soul. The play ends with the beginning of yet another struggle between the people and the white spirit for possession of the human soul. In "Gesat," part of the Beavvas Sami theater repertoire, a Sami spirit sets Matti, the floundering Lapp playwright, back on the true path so he can continue scripting the Sami people's story. For the Chupik Yupik Eskimo play, "Homecoming," Pingi (a voice of wisdom and translator for the elder) explains that the spirit of the dance provides the healing force to transform the troubled youth into a beautiful person. We can but stand awed by the healing power the playwrights attribute to the Native spirit(s).

The interview section of *Voices* proved least stimulating. However, Reidar Nilsson, artistic director for the Greenlandic theater, made an intriguing point. He maintained that to be effective as an actor in either Native or Anglo theater, the Inuit, Indian, or Sami

must drop their ethnic identity and concentrate on dramatic artistry (p. 112). The professionalism argument is two-sided. Being Native and understanding deeply the message a playwright wants to portray enhances cultural quality. Yet, training performers to become professionals also expands performance impact on the audience tremendously. The recent success of an Aleut dance performance group of Atka Islanders acutely highlights this effect. The dancers' faces reflect their pride as they execute special choreographies reminiscent of their ancestors' dances which became extinct early in this century. With the help of Aleut Native, Russian Koryak Native, and Anglo professionals including me, these dancers have not only revived their dead dramatic arts, but they have also broken new ground for Native dance groups throughout Alaska. Five standing ovations acknowledging their recent spectacular performance at an Alaska Federation of Natives meeting verify Native appreciation for their artistry, their professionalism, and their traditionalism. What made their performance a breakthrough? In Alaskan Eskimo dancing, performers stand in place, bobbing up and down to the traditional uneven drumbeat. The Atka dancers, costumed in traditional parkas and spectacular headgear, stage their dances using dramatic blocking, moving around the entire dance space to depict traditional stories, animal movements, or recent important events in choreographies that look as rich and exciting as those the internationally known Moiseyev dancers from Moscow use. This new, professionally oriented traditionally based performance created a sensation that rippled through the entire Alaska Native performing arts community. If their professional orientation elicits invitations to perform outside Alaska, the Atka Dancers can then carry their message of Native pride far beyond the state's borders into many cultures just as the Greenlandic and Sami theaters have done. This fulfills the second major impetus behind the rise of Native theater.

Its content makes *Aboriginal Voices* a difficult book to classify. It cannot qualify as scholarly research because the essayists use an editorial style rather than an academic orientation with footnoted resources and analytical problem exploration. Nonetheless, theater artists, folklorists, and dance ethnologists, can benefit from the material in *Aboriginal Voices*. It provides a springboard for further research into the semiotics of Native theater, the means of empowering Native people, and the construction of modern circumpolar Native spirituality.

Shirley Hauck, Ph.D.
Folklore North

Alaskan Eskimo Life in the 1890s As Sketched by Native Artists. By George Phebus, Jr. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1995. [originally published by the Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 1972]. 168 pages. \$18.95 paper.

This handsome reprint of George Phebus' 1972 book makes available once more the rare collection of 120 Inupiaq (and possibly Yupik) Eskimo drawings from the late 19th century illustrating Native life in Alaska. The drawings were rendered on the unlined side of lined school tablet paper, in pencil, ink, crayon or watercolor, but none is reproduced in color here. The book starts with a brief introduction, which discusses their discovery and their possible origins, along with a commentary on the early Alaskan schools and some other drawings from the same general period. Each section of the book has an introduction which, like the extensive captions, draw upon the appropriate literature to explicate the ethnographic and historical context and contents.

The origin of is somewhat mysterious. Rediscovered in the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology in 1967, they had been deposited there in 1910 when the museum of the Bureau of Education was closed. The drawings were found mounted on cardboard posters, with printed captions, as for display, and the catalogue cards read that they were from Kotzebue Sound. However, Phebus' research found no trace of their former exhibition or publication, and internal evidence, such as written captions, landscape formations, or styles of clothing and kayaks, shows that they might have come from a wider area of the Seward Peninsula and Norton Sound.

These are indubitably drawings saved by Bureau of Education teachers from many made in the newly established village schools. Perhaps the teachers saved those which showed talent, or those which interesting local or historical content. From the detail and sophistication of the renderings, we can surmise that they were done by older children familiar with practices of both prior traditional and then contemporary lives. A century later, the range of content depicted, hunting, trapping, herding and travel scenes, village games and kashim ceremonials, fauna and landscapes, has saved for us a record of the liveliness of Native life.